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**HOW RELEVANT WAS U.S. STRATEGY  
IN WINNING THE COLD WAR?**

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**John Lewis Gaddis**

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# HOW RELEVANT WAS U.S. STRATEGY IN WINNING THE COLD WAR?

John Lewis Gaddis

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This is the text of a banquet address given at the Army War College Strategy Conference on February 13, 1992. Portions of it summarize an article, "The Cold War, the Long Peace, and the Future," which is to appear in the summer 1992 issue of *Diplomatic History*.

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## FOREWORD

The cold war and containment of Soviet expansion have been the defining events for strategists since World War II. No one has described the history and strategy of that period with greater eloquence and objectivity than Professor John Lewis Gaddis.

In this address, Professor Gaddis examines the relevance of American cold war strategy to the collapse of European and Soviet communism. He describes three factors that were decisive to the success of containment as grand strategy. The first was the role of ideas. Western political and economic philosophers were vastly superior to state dominated, "scientific" socialism in mobilizing loyalty, productivity, and releasing the creativity of the human spirit.

Second, the role of nuclear weapons, even though costly, deployed in excessive numbers, and responsible for prolonging the cold war, did stabilize the conflict, allowing time for the triumph of Western ideas and values. Finally, the role of leadership and strategic vision, even though often unrecognized, was decisive at critical periods.

This essay was originally delivered as the banquet address at the Army War College's Annual Conference on Strategy. We are proud to publish it as part of the continuing debate over the lessons of the cold war.



WILLIAM A. STOFFT  
Major General, U.S. Army  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

JOHN LEWIS GADDIS is Distinguished Professor of History and Director of the Contemporary History Institute at Ohio University. A native of Texas, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, and has taught at Ohio University since 1969. He has also been Visiting Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College, Bicentennial Professor of American Studies at the University of Helsinki, and Visiting Professor of Politics at Princeton University. His major publications include: *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-47*; *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History*; *Strategies of Containment*; *A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*; and *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War*. He is currently working on two new projects: a biography of George F. Kennan; and a book to be titled *On Contemporary History*.

## HOW RELEVANT WAS U.S. STRATEGY IN WINNING THE COLD WAR?

Living through great events is hard work. We all know that something important has happened in the world when a quiet but determined group of Muscovites assembles in front of the KGB's headquarters and calmly dismantles the statue of its founder, or when Leningrad changes its name back to St. Petersburg, or when communism is outlawed in the country that gave it birth, or when that country itself suddenly ceases to exist. We know that we ought to be taking careful notice of these remarkable developments, trying to understand their causes and consequences, because they surely will affect our own future in profound, if as yet undetermined, ways. The simple obligation of being a witness to great events is not to be taken lightly. Some of us would give a good deal, after all, to be able to talk to someone who actually lived in the time of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, or the Battle of Waterloo, or the Bolshevik Revolution.

We tend to forget, though, that even in the middle of great events people have always had to worry about other things, like stashing away enough food to get through the winter, or getting the cows milked every morning, or paying rent to the landlord. It's not really all that different for us today, because whatever astonishing development CNN is bringing to us across the breakfast table, we still have the problem of finding a fresh shirt to put on in the morning, or not running out of cat food, or wondering whether we'll be able to find a parking place when we go into work. The monumental and the mundane often coexist in our lives, and as a result it is hard to make sense of what has really happened. What were you doing when the cold war once and for all, irrevocably, came to an end, your grandchildren are probably going to ask you. Worrying about dirty shirts, hungry cats, and parking tickets, you will probably answer, if you are perfectly honest about it.

One of the reasons society employs historians is to help it look past the laundry, the cats, and the meter maids to take in a wider view. That is what I would like to try to do, by addressing the question of how relevant American strategy was in bringing an end to the cold war. I should like to do this, though, by rather unconventional means. For once in my scholarly career, I want to talk about something other than the strategy of containment. Having written or edited no fewer than three books with the word "containment" in the title, I fear that my capacity for original thoughts on that subject is, by now, somewhat limited: at least that's what my colleagues, and my students, and my wife try, politely but regularly, to tell me. What I would like to do tonight is to follow my own advice and try to take a wider view: to focus on the role of ideas, of weaponry, and of leadership in American cold war strategy.

### **The Role of Ideas.**

When President Harry S. Truman stood before the Congress of the United States on March 12, 1947, to announce the doctrine that came to bear his name, he said that the world faced a conflict between two ways of life. The first way of life was based on the will of the majority and depended upon the existence of free institutions, representative government, and guarantees of individual liberty. The second was based on the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority through the use of terror, oppression, and the denial of personal liberties. The policy of the United States, Truman insisted, must be "to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," in short, to see to it that the first way of life prevailed over the second.

Most Americans at that time, I believe, saw things in pretty much the same way. That is why the United States was able to abandon its historic policy of isolationism in peacetime and commit itself, not only to the Truman Doctrine and its program for military and economic assistance to Greece and Turkey, but also to the much more ambitious Marshall Plan and eventually the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as well. The threat seemed to be real, and few people at the time had any

difficulty in explaining what it was. Freedom was under attack, it was totalitarianism that was attacking it.

But in the years that followed, it became fashionable, at least among academics, to discount the explanation Truman had given. The cold war, if you took the "realist" position, was about the balance of power, or about spheres of influence: it was not much different from the other great power rivalries of modern history. If you took the "revisionist" position, the cold war was about the self-serving aggressiveness of an American military-industrial complex that had set out to impose its "hegemony" over the rest of the earth in pursuit of power and profits. Issues of ideology and principle were never entirely written out of our explanations of cold war origins, but to say, as Truman did, that that conflict was primarily about the difference between freedom and its absence was widely regarded as too naive, too simplistic, and, above all, too self-righteous. Politicians might say that kind of thing from public platforms, it was argued; professors in the classroom shouldn't.

As a consequence, it was left to the people of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union itself—through their own spontaneous but collective actions over the past 2 years—to remind us of a fact that many of us had become too sophisticated to see, which is that the cold war really was about the imposition of autocracy and the denial of freedom. That conflict came to an end when at last it became clear that authoritarianism could no longer be imposed and freedom could no longer be denied.

Indeed, looking back now, not just on the cold war but on nine-tenths of the 20th century, we can see that a great deal of its history has revolved around the testing of a single idea: that one could transform the conduct of politics, government, and even human behavior itself into a science that would allow one not only to predict the future but even, within certain limits, to determine it. That, after all, is what the idea of communism, as practiced inside the Soviet Union, was all about.

This effort to transform politics into a science was undertaken with the best of intentions: the idea was to improve



the human condition by making human behavior rational, enlightened, and predictable. And the idea arose as a direct response to the abuses, excesses, and inequities that had grown out of the idea of freedom itself, at least as it had manifested itself in the form of the mid-19th century *laissez faire* capitalism Marx had so strongly condemned.

But the idea was flawed from the beginning for the simple reason that human beings don't behave like the objects science studies. They don't always act with the same predictability as molecules combining in a test tube, or ball bearings rolling down inclined planes in a physics lab, or even the "dependent variables" that figure so prominently in the writings—and, increasingly, the equations—of our contemporary social scientists.

It was precisely frustration with this irritating unpredictability of human beings that led Lenin to invert Marx and make the state the instrument that was supposed to secure human freedom, rather than the obstacle that stood in the way of it. But that same problem of human intractability in turn caused Stalin to invert Lenin and make the state, its survival, and its total control of all its surroundings an end in itself, with a consequent denial of freedom that was as absolute as any autocrat in the history of the world has ever managed to achieve. A movement that had set out in 1848 to free the workers of the world from their chains had wound up, by 1948 and through the logic of its "scientific" approach to politics, insisting that the condition of being in chains was one of perfect freedom.

It is perhaps a supreme testimony to Stalin's faith in the ability of science to account for human behavior that there was established early in his reign, and there continued to exist in Moscow, until late last year, a bizarre government-funded institute whose only apparent function was to preserve, in pickled form, the brains of top Soviet leaders and intellectuals—including those of Lenin and Stalin themselves—in an effort to determine, through careful dissection and analysis, the sources of their profound insights into the nature of man and society, and therefore into the future of us all. This is what the "scientific" approach to politics ultimately led to.

How, though, does all of this relate to the cold war? My point is simply this: it was entirely reasonable, as one contemplated the situation in Europe at the end of World War II, to regard Stalin's regime as a monstrous one, and to fear its possible expansion.

Now, it is true that the last thing Stalin wanted in 1947 was another world war: the Soviet Union was too exhausted for that to have been a possibility. That does not mean, though, that the dangers Truman warned against in 1947 were imaginary. There is such a thing as bending before what one mistakenly believes to be the "wave of the future"; that is how fascism had gained its foothold in Europe in the first place. Soviet communism appeared to be very much the wave of the future following Hitler's defeat, not because anyone really thought the Red Army was going to drive all the way to the English Channel and the Pyrenees, but rather because Europeans themselves were so demoralized that they might simply have allowed their own communists to take power by constitutional means, much in the way the Germans had voted in the Nazis in 1933. The effect would have been to spread Stalin's system throughout Europe without Stalin himself having to lift a finger. That was the threat.

The actions the United States took, through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, were seen at the time and I think will be seen by future historians as having overcome this condition of demoralization among the Europeans, as having preserved the idea of freedom in Europe by a narrow and precarious margin at a time when Europeans themselves, reeling from the effects of two world wars, had almost given up on it.

Now, to be sure, Western Europe might have saved itself even if the Americans had done nothing: some Western European historians are arguing just this point these days in their scholarly writings. There is no way to prove that they are wrong. But what is clear is that the Europeans themselves at the time didn't see things this way, and that brings us to one of the most important distinctions that has to be made if we are to understand the origins, evolution, and subsequent end of the cold war.

It is that the expansion of American influence into Western Europe and the expansion of Soviet influence into Eastern Europe—the events that really began the cold war—did not take place in the same way, and should not be regarded as morally equivalent. The Soviet Union, admittedly acting from primarily defensive motives, imposed its sphere of influence directly on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, against the will of the people who lived there. The Americans, also acting for defensive motives, were largely invited by the desperate governments of Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and even the Middle East to create their own countervailing sphere of influence in those regions. Compared to the alternative, falling under American influence was definitely the lesser of two evils.

This simple distinction between imposition and invitation—too easily lost sight of in too much of the writing that has been done about cold war history—proved in the end to be critical in determining the shape and ultimate outcome of the cold war. The system the United States built in Western Europe once European demoralization had been overcome—the Marshall Plan, NATO, and eventually the European Community—quickly won legitimacy in the form of widespread popular support. The Warsaw Pact and the other instruments of Soviet control in Eastern Europe never did. Why? Because the Europeans at the time saw obvious differences between free and authoritarian societies, just as more recent Europeans and now Russians themselves have come to see it. They had no more desire to be brought in under the Stalinist model of "scientific" politics than their children and grandchildren have had to remain there. Only this, I believe, can explain why Soviet control over Eastern Europe turned out to be a hollow shell, kept in place only by the sheer weight of Soviet military power. Once it became apparent, in the mid-1980s, that military power was no longer available to prop it up, the system Stalin imposed on half of Europe collapsed like a house of cards.

The way the cold war ended, therefore, was directly related to how it had begun. Harry Truman had it right after all: the struggle was, ultimately, about two ways of life, one that abandoned freedom in its effort to rationalize politics, and one that was content to leave politics as the messy business that

it normally is, and therefore to preserve freedom. The idea of freedom, in the end, proved to be more durable than the practice of authoritarianism, and as a consequence, the cold war ended. But it did take a while to get to that point.

### **The Role of Nuclear Weapons.**

That brings up another question I would like to talk about, which is why the cold war lasted as long as it did. If the Soviet system was as bankrupt—morally and economically—as it now appears to have been, then one has to wonder how the great conflict with it could possibly have lasted for some four and a half decades. For in addition to having been one of the longest conflicts in all of history, it was also clearly the costliest in terms of the physical resources expended in fighting it. When we consider all the other things we could have been using these resources for, it is a scandal that the cold war went on for as long as it did.

One of the answers frequently given to this question is that the American military-industrial complex had a vested interest in perpetuating the cold war. I would not wholly discount this explanation, as long as we recognize that military-industrial complexes existed on both sides, and that the one in the Soviet Union—about which we didn't hear very much until recently—was at least as powerful as its American counterpart. After all, a cold war is close to an optimum situation for a military-industrial complex: forces and material are produced in great quantity, thereby often although not always producing great profits, but because these instruments of war are rarely if ever used, one's physical plant remains safe from attack, as does one's reputation for competence in building weapons that work, even if some really don't.

But the military-industrial complex argument is too narrow in that it exaggerates the role of *interests* in perpetuating the cold war, and neglects the role of *fear*. That brings us to the controversial subject of nuclear weapons. These devices have for so long been so much the subject of our nightmares—but sometimes as well of our delusions of power—that it is difficult to discuss them dispassionately. We tend to want to see them

either as a Good Thing or a Bad Thing, and hence we tend to talk past one another most of the time. I would like to argue here that the role of nuclear weapons in cold war history was neither wholly good nor bad, which is to say, it was more interesting than either the supporters or the critics of these weapons have made it out to be.

Nuclear weapons were, of course, a very bad thing for the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; but those Americans and Japanese who were spared the necessity of additional fighting as a result of their use might be pardoned for seeing some good in them also. Nuclear weapons were a bad thing in that they greatly intensified the fears Soviets and Americans had of one another, and that much of the rest of the world had of both of them. But they were a good thing in that they induced caution on the part of both superpowers, discouraging irresponsible behavior of the kind that almost all great powers in the past have habitually engaged in, and that sooner or later could have led to another world war. Nuclear weapons were a bad thing in that they held the world hostage to what now seems the absurd concept of mutual assured destruction for over 30 years, but they were a good thing in that they probably perpetuated the reputations of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers, thereby allowing them more or less to "manage" a world political situation that might well have been less predictable and more dangerous had Washington and Moscow not been there to perform that function. Nuclear weapons were a bad thing in that they stretched out the length of the cold war by making the costs of being a superpower bearable on both sides and for both alliances—if the military rivalry had had to be conducted with more expensive conventional forces, it might well have ended long ago. But nuclear weapons were a good thing in that they allowed for the passage of time, and hence for the education of two competitors who eventually came to see that they didn't have all that much to compete about in the first place—or perhaps had even forgotten what they were competing about. Sometimes amnesia in itself can be a form of education.

Now, one doesn't have to explain the duration and eventual peaceful resolution of the cold war *solely* in terms of the

existence of nuclear weapons. It made a difference, obviously, that the United States and the Soviet Union occupied opposite sides of the earth, and hence had few direct conflicts with one another that could have led to military clashes. It helped that we both had rational leadership; no leader on either side ever really wanted another war. It was important that, despite their strong ideological differences, neither side regarded ideology as sacrosanct, and hence not subject to compromise or modification. It certainly made a difference to have before us the lessons of World Wars I and II, which showed how close nations can come to destroying themselves in a wholly legitimate effort to save themselves. And it may also be that we were just lucky.

But consider a few simple statistics, comparing the 45 years that preceded the invention of nuclear weapons with the 45 years that followed that event. The great powers—not all of the powers—suffered a total of about 70 million civilian and military deaths in war between 1900 and 1945; the total for the period 1945 to 1990—remember that I'm talking here only about the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Europe, and Japan—comes to about 1.6 million, of which 900,000 were incurred by a single country, China, during a single conflict, the Korean War. World War I is generally regarded as having broken out in 1914 after a series of six major diplomatic crises, beginning with the first Morocco crisis of 1905. World War II broke out in Europe in 1939 after five major crises, and in Asia in 1941 after another five. Since 1945 we have had, by my count, at least thirty-seven major diplomatic or military crises, beginning with the Iranian crisis of 1946 and coming right down through the Persian Gulf War of 1991, not one of which has even come very close to leading to a world war. Now, correlations should never be confused with causes, in history or anywhere else. But I, for one, have considerable difficulty in accepting the proposition that this dramatic shift away from the ancient human propensity for war would have played itself out in just the same way and with the same sharp clarity if we had not had nuclear weapons around to frighten all sides into responsible behavior, and thus to perpetuate a cold war that never did become hot.

## **The Role of Leadership.**

It is a mistake to see great events in history solely as the product of abstract, impersonal forces: great men, and women, do still make a difference. In fact, it would be difficult to make any sense at all out of Soviet history over the past seven decades without looking carefully at the role of distinctive individuals, whether Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, or Gorbachev. This is a curious thing in a country whose system was supposed to work independently of the personalities of its leaders, but the truth is that accidents of personality have been just as important in Russia after 1917 as they were before that date, when we referred to such accidents as tsars. What if Lenin had never made it to the Finland Station? What if Stalin had followed his mother's wishes and become a priest instead of a bank robber? What if, say, Molotov and not Khrushchev had been running the Soviet Union at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis? What if the rail line from Moscow to the Caucasus had not been built through Stavropol, so that Brezhnev, Andropov, and other Kremlin bigwigs traveling to their vacations in the south might never have met the bright young party boss of that region, who wound up presiding over the end of what Lenin began?

The trail of improbability is just as striking, if you think about it, on the American side. What if Henry Wallace and not Harry Truman had been president at the time the cold war began? Or if Robert Taft instead of Dwight Eisenhower had occupied the White House at the time it escalated? Or if Richard Nixon, with his well-known habits of cool-headedness in the face of crisis, had had to handle Soviet missiles in Cuba instead of John Kennedy? Or if Kennedy and not Johnson had run the Vietnam War? What peculiar twist of fate left it to Nixon, of all people, to end the cold war with the People's Republic of China during the 1970s, and to Ronald Reagan, of all people, to do the same a decade later with the Soviet Union? And, for that matter, I wonder sometimes, late at night, what Franklin D. Roosevelt would have thought the country had come to if he could have returned, four decades after his death, to find his old office occupied by someone he knew quite well, but only as a movie actor?

In his recent and fascinating book about the fossils of the Burgess shale, *Wonderful Life*, Stephen Jay Gould writes about the long series of improbable developments that allowed human consciousness to evolve: "any replay of the tape would lead evolution down a pathway radically different from the road actually taken. . . . Alter any early event, ever so slightly . . . , and evolution cascades into a radically different channel." (p. 51). That is, indeed, one way of looking at cold war history: an improbable juxtaposition of personalities and events brought us to where we are today, which is to say, we are damned lucky to be here.

But I would argue that cold war history in fact illustrates a somewhat different point, which has to do with the capacity of individual leaders—whatever their backgrounds and however improbable the circumstances that catapulted them into their positions of authority—to learn from experience. Virtually all of the major leaders of the cold war demonstrated, to at least some degree, the capacity for reconsideration, maturation, and growth, if not always wisdom.

Harry Truman, the only leader ever to authorize the actual military use of nuclear weapons, could rant and rave, in the privacy of his diary, about how much he'd like to do so again, with the Kremlin as the target. But this was the same man who refused even seriously to consider the use of these weapons in Korea, and thereby established the immensely important precedent that nuclear powers do not automatically employ nuclear weapons when they get involved in wars. Joseph Stalin, a tyrant if there ever was one, was apparently making moves in the direction of peaceful coexistence, even as he was planning new purges and persecutions of Jews at the time of his death. Winston Churchill, a man who had always relished, and even at times glorified war, became, in his late 70s, one of the first statesmen to see that war had become impossible in a nuclear age. Dwight Eisenhower, who had built his career on the preparation for, and the practice of, war, ended it by warning of war's consequences in ways whose vividness—and eloquence—have not since been equaled. John Foster Dulles, the prototypical cold war ideologue, was, we now know, looking toward the abolition of nuclear weapons, the fragmentation of



international communism, and the eventual transformation of the Soviet Union into a normal member of the international state system.

Nikita Khrushchev, who boasted of turning out rockets like sausages and whose own actions brought the world as close as it has ever come to a nuclear war, was also the Soviet leader who accepted the idea of negotiating arms control agreements, tolerating satellite reconnaissance, and restraining belligerent allies like Mao and Castro who actually wanted to use nuclear weapons. Mao himself evolved from a revolutionary radical who once boasted that China could win a nuclear war simply because there were more Chinese than anybody else, to a careful and calculating geopolitician and an admirer of Richard Nixon. Nixon's own personal evolution from early cold war Red-baiting to late cold war detente-building was one of the most remarkable of any cold war statesman; but it was no more remarkable than the transition that Ronald Reagan *seemed* to go through in the 5 years that separated his evil empire speech from his joint appearance with Mikhail Gorbachev in Red Square, not on top of Lenin's tomb, but in front of it, as both men worked the crowd, shaking hands and kissing babies, while their respective military aides—holding the briefcases containing the codes and target lists for annihilating each other's country—tried to remain inconspicuously in the background.

My point, in all of this, is that the leaders of great states, like most other people, learn from experience. We fail to do them justice when we try to cram them into categories, or to predict, on the basis of their apparent attributes, how they will behave in the future. I had occasion to learn this lesson myself some years ago when I attended a conference in Moscow late in 1985 and was driven across town by a shy, sallow, and extremely reticent young historian from the USA Institute who had obviously been assigned to perform this task. He was so quiet, so cautious, and so meek that it was impossible to get any information from him about current living conditions in Moscow, or about his reaction to the conference papers, or even about what he wanted to do with his future career. "I have no opinions on this matter," he said with a sigh. "I will do

whatever my superiors tell me." Well, as it turned out, this was Sergei Stankevich, who within 3 years had emerged as one of the earliest and most vocal critics of Gorbachev, became one of the principal leaders in the Russian parliament, the deputy mayor of Moscow, a key supporter of Boris Yeltsin, and clearly one of the potential future leaders of an independent Russian Republic. You never know.

Historians obviously will regard Gorbachev as the most important figure in bringing the cold war to an end, for it was he through the sheer force of his personality and his political skill who gave the old Soviet system the push that has now sent it over the edge. To what extent he intended that result, however, remains unclear: he may very well have set out to end the cold war; but I doubt very much, when he began this process, that he also intended to bring about the collapse of communism and the end of the Soviet Union as we have known it. But then it's worth recalling that Abraham Lincoln had no desire to fight a civil war or to end slavery when he took office in 1861. As Lincoln wrote, a week before his assassination: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." Gorbachev, I suspect, understands this very well, for leadership, when you get right down to it, is less a matter of steering a great ship through troubled waters than it is one of white-water rafting, or perhaps riding a surfboard on top of a big wave. Just because you manage to stay afloat doesn't necessarily mean that you're in control, or that you have any idea of where you're eventually going to wind up.

There was one cold war leader, though, who did have a pretty clear idea, from the time he assumed his responsibilities, of where he would like to wind up, and historians will find, I think, that he came remarkably close to getting there. He is none other than the man now regularly referred to in sophisticated journals like the *Republic* and the *New York Review of Books* as the "child emperor," or "Mr. Magoo." I refer, of course, to the President of the United States during the years 1981-89, a man whose anticipation of the end of the cold war—and whose contribution toward hastening that development—has so far been underrated.

cold war, and might even go out and see a movie together. One NSC staffer, on seeing this draft, is said to have exclaimed loudly: "Who wrote this shit?"

It was President Reagan who saw immediately, after Gorbachev came into power in 1985, that he was a different kind of Soviet leader, and that one could do business with him. It was President Reagan who startled Gorbachev, at their first meeting, by saying that if Martians or some other extra-terrestrials should land tomorrow, Russian and American differences would disappear overnight—Lou Cannon, Reagan's biographer, thinks he got this idea from the old movie, "The Day the Earth Stood Still," in which Michael Rennie emerges from his flying saucer and demands that the nations of the world give up all their nuclear weapons and settle their differences. And when Gorbachev himself proposed this same idea to Reagan at the Reykjavik summit in 1986, the President, to the horror of his aides, is said to have replied: "Give up all nuclear weapons? I've been in favor of that for a long time."

Now, President Bush is often said to be such a sophisticated student of international relations that he preoccupies himself too much with the details of foreign policy, and hence lacks "the vision thing." And yet, at the same time, we criticize President Reagan for having had too many visions, and for not having mastered the details. I don't think we can have it both ways. I suspect that, once we academics get over our usual tendency to be condescending about whoever is in office, even if we have to scramble to find different reasons for doing so, historians will come around to the view that Reagan's visions of an end to the cold war were more important in the long-term scheme of things than his failure to rein in Ollie North, or his habit of sleeping through cabinet meetings, or even his periodic rearrangements of his schedule to meet the wishes of Mrs. Reagan's astrologer. Obviously, though, it will take some time for our sophisticated observers of international relations to come around to this point of view.

After all, "sophistication" is often nothing more than the tendency to accept conventional wisdom. It is the habit of

operating within an established framework of thought, whether in an academic, professional, or official capacity. It has to do with the easy assumption that there's no need to ask tough questions because you're an expert, which is to say, you've got it all figured out. We all know people who think like this; some of us may even do it ourselves from time to time.

One problem with this kind of sophistication, though, is that it's self-perpetuating. It discourages innovation. Change, when it occurs—whether in the academic, professional, or official worlds—generally comes when somebody does something that seems, at first, naive, odd, or even flaky. Think of Darwin, comparing the beaks of birds in the Galapagos. Think of the geologist Alfred von-Wegener, who had this weird idea that continents could actually move around on the face of the earth. Think of a couple of California kids named Jobs and Wozniak, who decided in the mid-1970s to build a computer in their garage. But think also of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, Vaclav Havel, and thousands of people like them, who were naive enough, odd enough, flaky enough to think that by simply writing histories, novels, plays, and manifestos, often while sitting in prison or in exile, they could undermine the authority of one of the most authoritarian regimes that had ever existed. And then think about those few statesmen on both sides of what used to be the Iron Curtain who refused to accept the notion that the cold war and all of its costly appurtenances had to be a permanent and inescapable condition of life on this planet. Who was sophisticated and who was not?

## **Conclusions.**

Let me conclude by suggesting that asking whether U.S. strategy was relevant in winning the cold war is a little like asking whether Grant's strategy was relevant in defeating Robert E. Lee. Of course it was.

It made a difference that the United States responded to invitations from beleaguered Europeans to save them from scientific Stalinism. It made a difference that the United States handled nuclear weapons responsibly, thus setting an

example for the rest of the world. It made a difference that we had leaders with vision—even if one of them took some of them from the movies—who were prepared to respond to changes from within the Soviet Union when they occurred. And it made a difference, after all, that we remained—more or less—true to ourselves: that we did not, in the process of containing our adversary, take on the characteristics of that adversary. Of course American strategy was relevant.

Whether our successful cold war strategies are relevant to the new and very different world that confronts us, however, is quite another question. For the first time in over half a century, no external adversary confronts us, and that ought to be grounds for celebration. But the country is, quite literally, worn out—that's why we don't much feel like celebrating. It has taken the end of the cold war to make us realize what the cold war has cost us over the years, in terms of our economy, our society, and indeed even our psychology, which came to depend upon the existence of an outside adversary as the principle justification for holding the country together. We ought to have—and indeed we now badly need—better reasons than this.

The most relevant strategy for the post-cold war era, then, may well be to find such a reason: to take advantage of this opportunity we now have to regain our strength, our substance, and our solvency, for only if we do that can we hope to enjoy the fruits of the famous victory we, our allies, and perhaps even our former adversaries, have so decisively achieved.

**U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE**

**Commandant  
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